Articles by Alexander Graham Bell, from April 7, 1887, to November 22, 1909, with transcript

SCIENCE AND IMMORTALITY.

In 1887 the Editor of the Christian Register secured a number of contributions to a symposium on the subject of Science and i mmortality. Many of the contributions were published “in the Christian Register of April 7, 1887.” So much interest was aroused that the Editor in preparing to preserve them in permanent book form, wrote to other scientists for an expression of their opinion. It He states, in the Preface, “the contributions have all been submitted to their authors for revision; and the work has been much enriched by additional contributions from Prof. A. Graham Bell,” and others. Under the caption of “Notes on the Testimony” Dr. Barrows, the Editor, wrote on page 110.

“To the mind of Prof. Alexander Graham Bell, the evolutionary hypothesis tends to weaken belief in the immortality of personal consciousness, yet he admits that ‘if the ego is a distinct existence elemental in character, every analogy would indicate its immortality’” Dr. Bell's contribution is copied from pages 94 to 99.

“ Science and Immortality. ”

“XXVII. ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL.”

“ I understand the the object of your inquiry is to ascertain the bearing of scientific discoveries upon the question of immortality, and that you simply solicit my personal opinion upon the subject.

“ 1. To my mind, the “ ‘ Evolutionary Hypothesis ’ ” tends to weaken belief in the “immortality of personal consciousness” by revealing a cause for the growth of such an idea quite independently of its truth.

“ In the “ ‘ struggle for existence, ’ ” a fear of death would often operate to preserve life. Especially to early man would such fear have been advantageous; for, in many cases, he was weaker than the formidable animals with which he had to cope, and inferior to them in ability to find safety in flight, so that he must consequently have escaped death only by the exercise of ingenuity. The inventive faculty would thus be stimulated by the fear of death, and those persons would survive who were intelligent 2 enough to adopt the weapons and devices that were best fitted to preserve their lives and destroy their enemies. As destructive power increased through invention and the survival of the intelligent, the mental faculties would be still further stimulated by the conflict of man with man.

“ Thus, in man, the fear of death, being advantageous, would be preserved and intensified by natural selection, and be correlated with his mental growth.

“ The idea of immortality would find in man a mental soil in which to take root and grow, for the desire for immortality would be strong in those who feared to die. The idea, once formulated, would be bound to the heart by the feelings engendered by the social state. Who would not cherish the thought that the dear ones who have left us still live, and think of us and love us as of old? And who would not cling to the hope that the affliction and misery and wrong that we see around us may be somehow righted in another life?

As a matter of fact, an instinctive fear of death has been handed down to us from the past; and mankind approaches the subject of your inquiry with an inherited bias in favor of immortality. The emotions are so strongly enlisted as to oppose an obstacle to investigation; and the heart whispers to the brain, “ ‘ Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise. ’ ” An instinctive desire is felt to avoid issue with a blessed and consolatory belief,

by considering the whole subject of immortality as outside the pale of heartless “science,” which seeks truth, and truth alone, quite apart from any consequences that may arise.

“ “ ‘ Personal consciousness ’ ” — or the perception of the “ego” — is one of the highest manifestations of thought.

“ The possibility of thought without a brain whereby to think is opposed to experience, but the persistence of “ ‘ personal consciousness ’ ” after the death of the body involves this assumption.

“ Our asylums for idiots and insane are full of arguments favoring the hypothesis of a causal connection between the condition of the brain and the mind.

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“ “ ‘ Mens sana in corpore sano ’ ” was the experience of the past; and the verdict of modern science, I think, only adds confirmation. So dependent is “ ‘ personal consciousness ’ ” upon bodily conditions that its loss may be caused by simple pressure on the substance of the brain. Even under normal circumstances, we nightly lose consciousness in sleep. Syncope may result from a disturbance of the circulation of the blood, and unconsciousness can be produced at will by the employment of anaesthetics.

“ 2.Such facts as these show that the individual may exist without self-consciousness; and if what we call “ ‘ the soul ’ ” is a separate and distinct entity,— distinct from the body, — I can see nothing in science to negative the assumption of its immortality, while at the same time I can find nothing to support the hypothesis of personal consciousness without a body.

“ The perception of the “ ‘ ego ’ ” does not necessarily prove the existence of a soul as a distinct entity, any more than our other perceptions prove that light, heat, and sound are entities. Indeed, we know that these are not; and the self-same movement of the

luminiferous medium may be perceived by one sense as light, and another as heat, — a dual perception from a single cause.

“ While, then, it is true (so far as I know) that science cannot assert that there is such a thing as a soul at all, it is equally true that it cannot postulate its non-existence.

“ Some of the highest generalizations of science, the “ ‘ indestructibility of matter ’ ” and the “ ‘ conservation of energy, ’ ” point to the immortality of the elements of which we are composed. If the “ ‘ ego ’ ” is a distinct existence, — elemental in character, — every analogy would indicate its immortality.

“ This is the most, I think, that science can say in favor of immortality; but, if it favors the hypothesis at all, it does so backwards as well as forwards.

“ We have no personal consciousness of any prenatal existence; but, if an elemental (though unconscious) “ ‘ ego ’ ” existed before birth, then we have proof from experience (in the fact of our present existence) that such a soul, under suitable conditions 4 of environment, may acquire a body and the power of self-consciousness.

“ Embryology favors the belief that the wonderfully complex organism which we inhabit has arisen as a new creation out of an almost structureless mass of protoplasm, and it discredits the old idea that the perfect man was to be found in miniature in the embryo. The theory of epigenesis teaches that “ ‘ the organs of the embryo arise by new formation , and not by mere enlargement out of a pre-existing invisible condition. ’ ” In the egg of a bird, we can find, at first, no trace of bone or muscle or down; and yet the presence of a vitalized germ determines, in that egg, the formation of the living bird.

“ 3. I do not think that any subject of fact can be considered as beyond the pale of science, although there are many subjects which cannot be directly investigated on account of lack of data from which to make deductions.

“ The question of what exists beyond death is like asking what there is on the other side of the moon. We can never know for certain till we go there! We may feel sure that something exists on the other side; and, while it may be impossible for us ever to obtain even a glimpse of the reality, we may hope to arrive at conclusions more or less probable by study of the side submitted to our view. ”

checked Copied from Beinn Breagh Recorder November 22, 1909. MORAL EDUCATION IN CHILDHOOD (Copied from Dictated Notes, 1906, p 58). Mr. Gilbert H. Grosvener, 1328 — 18th Street, N. W., Washington, D. C.

Oct. 14:— I find myself here at the house-boat with Mr. Baldwin, and I am trying to think up a few more reminiscences of my boyhood for your benefit. I haven't said anything so far about moral training in childhood, but this part of my education was by no means neglected.

As a child, I was deeply inbued with what may be called the religious instinct, and this was developed to the utmost by my mother, and with such success that I am afraid I was quite a goody-goody boy — at least until I reached years of discretion!

My father and mother were regular church-goers although my mother was unable to hear anything that went on in church. We boys were accustomed to hunt out the passages in the Bible that were read from the pulpit; and my mother would read them to herself. We would also hunt out the hymns for her benefit and she would read them while the congregation sang. My father had invented a system of phonetic short-hand and read it to my mother when she got home. We boys also were questioned by my mother concerning what went on in church. We had to remember the text and give her something of the sermon. We attended a Baptist Church, but my father changed to another — I think the Presbyterian. The Presbyterian may have been the first and the Baptist last — I am not sure of the order now, but I remember the cause of the change. You will recollect that my father owned or rented a public hall in Edinburgh, known as Buccleugh Street Hall, where

he gave public readings. He did not confine himself to Shakespeare, but was accustomed to read condensations of the best works 2 of the best writers. He also presented to the public the works of new writers.

It so happened that he was the first to read in public the works of Charles Dickens. This was too much for the officers of the church to which he belonged; and a deputation from the church waited upon him to remonstrate against the reading of the works of such a man as Charles Dickens. This remonstrance however did not have the effect intended for my father publically criticized the narrow-minded deputation and changed his church.

I must have been very impressionable in those days, for I remember on one occasion going inside an English Church with my parents, and feeling what a guilty thing it was to do. Nothing would have induced me to enter a Roman Catholic Church; and I had the feeling in those days that the English Church was really the Roman Catholic Church in disguise:— The difference being that the services were conducted in English instead of in Latin.

In one corner of our garden at Milton Cottage, my father had built a photographic darkroom. He was interested in photography in the earliest days of the art, using the old wet process. We boys of course also learned photography. We used to coat glass plates with collodion; place them in a nitrate of silver bath; expose them, and develop them all by ourselves. There was only one thing that I objected to:— My father did not think it wrong to take photographs on Sunday, and when one Sunday he wanted to take my picture my religious feelings found vent in words, and I told him that I thought “Sunday was a day for “meditation”. I must have been a very little fellow at the time. My father laughed good-naturedly, and allowed me to do as I chose; and so I used to go into the summer-house in the garden every Sunday to “meditate”, although what I meditated upon I am sure I do not know. I only know that I used to sit there for a long time every Sunday by myself.

My brothers, however, were not so particular. They liked to play on Sunday as well as on other days, and I myself often was tempted to join them, but it was with a guilty feeling as though I were doing something wrong.

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One Sunday I played “Keek-a-boo” with my younger brother Edward. The greenhouse had windows only two or three feet from the ground, that were swung on a horizontal axis, and opened outwards. On this occasion my brother was hiding under one of these open windows, but had put his head out under the edge of the sash to look out for me, when I suddenly appeared with the exclamation “Keek-a-boo”. My brother instantaly drew back his head with such force that the sharp edge of the window sash took his scalp right off excepting the front part near the front part near the forehead. I led him into the house to my mother with his scalp hanging over his face, bloody side out. Just imagine what a shock it must have been to her. I was too young to think of that.

My father put the scalp back in place, and I ran to Edinburgh for a carriage and a doctor. We drove him to our Edinburgh house. A barber was secured to shave his head before the surgeon could stitch on the scalp. The appearance of the head was so horrible that the barber fainted before he could complete his job. Then the time came to put in the stitches, and I fled downstairs to the kitchen, and stuck my head out of the window with the sash on the back of my neck, so that I should not hear my brother scream. The fact, was, however, that his sensibilities had been blunted, and he felt little or no pain, and did not give utterance to any cries. He recovered in a few days, but more ever afterwards a scar several inches long, which was only partly concealed by the way he wore his hair. I remember I used to consider this accident as a judgment of God for playing on Sunday, and my meditations in the summer-house were very earnest after that.

I was quite passionate as a boy; but while the pugnacious instincts of boyhood were well developed in me, I was too well trained by my mother to indulge in fights. When I went to the Royal High School, I was carefully warned by my mother about the wickedness

of getting into fisti-cuff arguments. The other boys soon found this out, and they used to tease me with the object of getting up a fight.

On one occasion a boy slapped my face; and after the first blush of resentment, I meekly turned to him the other cheek.

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The opportunity was too good to be wasted, and he gave me such a whack on the other cheek as effectually to arouse my fighting instincts. In a moment I pitched into him while the boys on the play-ground formed a ring, and we became the center of at least a hundred boys. How many rounds we fought I do not know, for suddenly a cry arose that one of the masters was coming. The crowd dissolved, and we were mixed up with the crowd. Then the school bell rang, and we went into our classes. I became very repentent for having disobeyed my mother, and for not following the teaching of the Bible.

Upon leaving the classroom therefore, I did not seek to renew the quarrel, and the other boy avoided me. I never fought again on my own account; but I did pitch into other boys sometimes when they tormented my younger brother Edward. I had no hesitation in defending him to the utmost of my ability with the result that they speedily left him alone.

My brother Edward and I were thrown closely together while children, from the fact that we attended the same class and had companions in common. My brother Melville was my senior by two years, and was in a higher class at school. He had his own companions with whom he associated, and Edward and I were only his “little brothers” with whom it was a condescension to play. After passing through the whole curriculum of the High School, I associated more with my elder brother Melville, than with Edward, especially during the period when we were at work together on the construction of a s peaking- m achine. Our tastes were similar. We were fond of mechanical contrivances, and had a strong inclination towards scientific studies; whereas my brother Edward developed a taste for art which was fostered by our artistic mother. His pen and ink sketches and drawings were really

quite remarkable for a boy. He died when about sixteen or seventeen years of age. Had he lived, I have no doubt that he would have taken to art as a profession.

AGB.